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ABSTRACT

Evaluating a reader's ability to use language to derive meaning should be one of the major emphases of reading instruction. A technique which is used in miscue research to evaluate a reader's comprehension of written material is called the retelling. The reader's retelling of a story or passage provides information about his or her ability to derive meaning from what was read. In addition, student responses to teacher questions posed during the retelling can provide feedback so that the teacher can examine and analyze the comprehension questioning techniques. The retelling is divided into two portions, the unaided retelling and the aided or directed retelling, each of which is described in detail. When readers use their own experiential backgrounds to interpret any written material, reading becomes personalized and meaningful. In this context, reading is an active process with the reader as participant. (TS)

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READING: COMMUNICATION & COMPREHENSION

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Few people would reject the premise that since comprehension is the ultimate goal of any reading act, the major objective of reading instruction should be to help individuals attain this goal. Achieving this end requires that the skills taught in schools should be tools which help individuals process print, so that they can reconstruct written information to construct new knowledge. Unfortunately, in their zeal to teach the skills, educators often lose sight of the purpose of reading and the ultimate goal of reading instruction. Through their efforts to help children become proficient readers, these educators allow the teaching of skills to become the end goal or purpose of instruction. The skills become more important than the reason for teaching the skills.

Children who can't read well, or who dislike reading, often become confused and begin to believe that the most necessary ingredient for success in reading is the ability to reproduce the exact speech equivalents represented by the printed symbols. They learn to be more concerned with the "correct" sound or the "correct" word than with understanding what was read. Those individuals think of it primarily as "sounding out words", and not as a communicative, language process.

Now more than ever, the necessity to be literate in a print-oriented society demands that reading instruction focus attention on comprehension and that it be presented in a way that defines

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reading as a communicative, language process. If reading is not presented in an active, communication contest involving whole, natural language, the reader may get the impression that it is a puzzle solving task and not a process of deriving meaning. The major problem with reading instruction has been an overemphasis on the precision with which the orthographic representation of language is recoded into speech.

The purpose of reading any written material is to derive meaning. Once meaning is derived, however, readers can and do react to the written information in a variety of ways. The specific reaction and meaning derived depend upon a reader's initial purpose in reading the material, as well as the previous experience, background information, and language skills the reader brings to the reading situation.

The most important ingredient that all readers bring to any reading situation is the ability to use language and to communicate. Reading is a language process and since there is variability in phonology, syntax, and semantics among the various dialects of English, it can never be an exact process. The dialect of the reader affects not only the pronunciation of words, but also how closely the syntax of the passage is adhered to and the way in which the passage is interpreted. Therefore, the reading teacher must be very much aware of what children do with language when they read, and how this language interaction affects comprehension. Evaluating the reader's ability to use language to derive meaning should be one of the major emphasis of reading instruction. Evaluation provides

the teacher with insights into reader strengths and weaknesses in terms of how the reader processes written language to derive meaning.

However, the ability to comprehend or derive meaning from written material is affected not only by the reader's language, but also by the reader's past experiences. Both the reader's language and experiential backgrounds are intricately webbed together and represent a unique individual, the product of a social and linguistic culture. Unfortunately, comprehension is frequently evaluated in terms of how closely the reader's answer approximates the teacher's answer or the answer in the teacher's manual. This type of evaluation of comprehension does not consider the language and experiences of the reader as important factors which affect the reader's understanding of what was read. Rather, it assumes that all readers come to the reading situation with similar, if not identical, language and experiential background.

A technique which is used in miscue research to evaluate a reader's comprehension of written material is called the retelling. The reader's retelling of a story or passage provides information about his/her ability to derive meaning from what was read. In addition, student responses to teacher questions posed during the retelling can provide feedback so that the teacher can examine and analyze his/her comprehension questioning technique. The major difficulty with employing the retelling technique as a method of evaluating comprehension is that the teacher must not only listen attentively to the reader's comments, but also use those

comments to ask open-ended questions which illicit more responses from the reader. Equipped with a tape-recorder and a spirit of adventure, a teacher can develop the ability to ask good comprehension questions by listening to the questions and the reader's responses on the tape recorder.

The retelling is divided into two portions, the unaided retelling and the aided or directed retelling. Immediately following the reading, the teacher asks the reader to tell as much as he/she can remember about what was read. This retelling provides information about the reader's initial understanding of the material without any prompting from the teacher. After the reader has finished retelling all that he/she can remember, the teacher asks specific questions about the material. The purpose of the aided or directed retelling is to gather information which the reader ignored and/or dealt with superficially, and to clarify unclear statements without providing any additional information to the reader. For example, if the reader relates, "The boy won a race," the teacher should not ask, "How did Umi win the holua race?" The teacher should not assume that the reader has assimilated any information that was not made explicit during the unaided retelling. Instead, the teacher should respond with, "Tell me more about the race that the boy won," or "Tell me about the boy who won the race." Questions which use the information provided by the reader to elicit additional information insure responses which require the reader to expand and

clarify statements and ideas. When the teacher uses this technique, the reader is not bound to an answer or to a particular response style. Furthermore, the reader is relating information and knowledge that he/she gathered and incorporated form the written material. Also, the teacher can gain valuable insights into the reader's focus of attention when reading. Moreover, this technique allows students the opportunity to expound their own interpretations of what was read, and to explore the reasons for these interpretations. In using this technique with students, the teacher must demonstrate the skillful practice of judicious silence as well as the ability to formulate questions which focus beyond the literal level of comprehension.

Miscue research reveals that students usually can recall most of the surface information provided in the story. During the students' synopses of the unaided retelling, and in responding to the open-ended question of the directed retelling, students almost invariably provided accurate factual information about the characters, events, and setting. In addition, open-ended questions directed beyond the literal level of comprehension require the readers to draw upon their own backgrounds of experiences in explaining the inferential information deduced from the story. When readers use their own experiential backgrounds to interpret any written material, reading becomes personalized and meaningful. Reading treated as an interpretive, communication process makes it personal. Readers come to recognize that the goal of

reading is not simply to sound out words, but to extract meaning, a personal meaning. They begin to appreciate written material in terms of thier own personal lives, and no longer in terms of the answer that the teacher expects or the answer dictated by the teacher's manual. In this context, reading is an active process with the reader as participant.